

# Relationships for Sustainability

## *The role of relationships in education and sustainability*

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Relationship matters. As educators, you know this. So, have the conversation about the importance of relationship in sustainability education! Be explicit about the role of relationship in change! Be sure to include time in education project design, delivery and evaluation for building relationship.

This short piece opens questions related to the value we place of interpersonal relationships in our work. It also offers some suggested approaches for focusing on the relational aspects of projects and learning.

Humans are tuned for relationships (Abram, 1997). Humans developed in relationship with everything around them over many thousands of years; we are who we are through our relationships with each other, organisations, systems and processes, events, experiences, other species, the inanimate elements of Earth, the past and future, resources and ideas. We are always, *always* in relationship. It is known that the institutional, political and environmental dimensions of sustainability require *people to work and learn together* to make change (Cox, 1995, and Brown et al 2004). Values, assumptions, behaviours and norms are socially and collectively determined; they emerge from relationship. Our choices and actions are shaped in relation to other people. The authors hold that **sustainability is all about relationship**, and that healthy interpersonal relationships aid learning in formal and informal education contexts. While this is not new news to educators, it sometimes needs to be made more explicit.

Literature in this field focuses on providing techniques for change management and the skills required to build engagement. It rarely talks in detail about the need to recognise the time and effort that is required to work on the relationships; to enable trusting relationships to be developed with key stakeholders, new staff, existing staff, senior management and the community; or to develop 'knowing' that is required as a precursor for willingness to share, change or adapt. Little is given in the literature to help people map their professional and project-based relationships and then plan them effectively; and the need for high quality relationship-building processes is generally unrecognised. Partnerships are recommended but the time, energy and trust required to build them are not valued.

Everyone has stories of how relationships help or hinder learning processes, progress and outcomes. We have the good and the bad. What are your stories? Ask people in your teams and education projects if they can think of situations where positive relationships helped push through a project or increased understanding and acceptance of change. Can you think of the opposite situations? Build these discussions into education project planning and delivery.

Especially in education projects, there are several reasons why relationships are undervalued and, at times, break down. They include: a lack of shared understanding about why relationships between people are crucial to the success of a sustainability project or program; the quest for quick and quantifiable sustainability outcomes to the detriment of the human connections; and inadequate skills in managing difficult relationships. Relationship-building takes time, patience, commitment and skills.

Good relationships are important to sustainability outcomes because:

- Motivating substantial and ongoing social change through education often requires a willingness to ask questions and learn from others. This process is much easier within supportive relationships.
- At the end of the day, it is *people* who get things done – or who get in the way of getting things done! Movement toward sustainable outcomes through education happens more effectively when people are pulling in the same direction. There will be tension and disagreement at times: these need to be cherished and their energy needs to be focused on finding appropriate solutions within shared knowledge and values.
- For sustainability outcomes to be met, we need to generate a shared understanding of situations and aspirations, and we can only do that through quality relationships.
- Relationships help extend our boundaries of care. In relationship, we learn we are interdependent. Sustainability outcomes driven through education result from acknowledging and acting on that interdependence across all aspects of the quadruple bottom line.
- It is *people* together who bring passion, commitment and progress to challenging problems. The educational processes harnesses and expands this through building/supporting relationships of quality.
- Outcomes themselves are not sustainable without ongoing relationships. Otherwise, we're making snapshots not a movie.

### **Implications for education**

Following, are three implications for the work we do in education.

Each of us needs to ensure there is explicit discussion in our organisation/team about how and why relationships are essential to sustainability. We might have to take the lead in talking about the nature of relationships as projects develop and evolve. We might have to be the person who puts 'relationship' issues on the table. If we shy away from it, it may come back to bite!

It's important to build good rapport with individual participants in the education process and to mediate positive relationships within the group. Everyone owns the responsibility for

doing this. And this understanding is one of the learnings in all projects! Comment on it a part of the evaluation. Make relationship-building an evaluation outcome!

It's vital to get our own relational skills in order – modelling is crucial in education work. Each of us needs to consider our own relationship to the project. How do we feel about it? How do we think it might go? How do we want it to go? We need to ask who we will need to work especially hard with in order to build constructive relationships. How will I manage disagreement and conflict?

We are always in relationship. Being aware of this matters. Doing something to build constructive relationships for learning and sustainability matters even more. Educators must claim the time and find the energy needed to develop constructive, productive, positive relationships, and they must keep a focus on maintaining these relationships throughout the project

Note that we have put together a couple of different formats for workshopping the role of relationship in education project/program development and management. We are looking to run some of these in the first half of 2012. Contact Phil at [rephilled@hotmail.com](mailto:rephilled@hotmail.com) if you'd like to find out more.

## References

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